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Narratologische Untersuchungen zu japanischen Texten

*Herausgegeben von Christian Steineck und Simone Müller*



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Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern  
[info@peterlang.com](mailto:info@peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.net](http://www.peterlang.net)

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*Narṛiṇai: Text and Translation. Translated by N. Kandasamy Pillai. Presented by Kannan M. and V. Arasu.* IFP – Publications hors série 7. Pondichéry 2008. ISBN: 978-81-8470-165-4. Pp. xxxii + 284.

The book contains a translation of the classical Tamil text *Narṛiṇai* prepared by N. Kandasamy Pillai (1898–1977) when he was working for the Institut Français de Pondichéry between 1962 and 1967. The typed manuscript of the translation has been preserved in the library of that institute, where it has been consulted and, as the editors claim, pillaged by many scholars. Therefore the editors considered it their duty to publish it so that Kandasamy could receive the credit which was his due. This publication brings the total of recent translations of the *Narṛiṇai* to four. Beside the one by Kandasamy there are (in order of appearance): *Narrinai (An Anthology of Amour)*. Translated by A.V. Subramanian. Thanjavur 1989; *The Narṛiṇai Four Hundred*. Translated by Dr. A. Dakshinamurthy. Chennai 2001; and Eva Wilden, *Narṛiṇai: A Critical Edition and an Annotated Translation of Narṛiṇai*. Vols I–III. Chennai-Pondicherry 2008. It is therefore a good time to take stock of the situation.

The four translations can be divided into two categories. The ones by Kandasamy and Wilden present what the former characterizes as “linguistic” translations, while the other two, by Subramanian and Dakshinamurthy, are more or less free, poetic renderings of the Tamil texts. What has been labelled a linguistic translation is ideally a literal translation or paraphrase which makes visible the grammatical relations between the words and accounts for possible idiomatic and metaphorical meanings in their usage. Unfortunately, the two examples of such translations, by Kandasamy and Wilden, are far removed from this ideal. More than once the result is just a garbled English text. As to the two poetic translations, I do not want to comment on their poetic character per se. What should be noted, though, is that the relationship between the Tamil text and the translation is often hard to find, so that one may wonder why they have been published by scholarly presses. Coming to the latter point, namely the scholarly quality of the translations, all four translations suffer from a complete lack of interest in philological problems on the part of the respective authors. In what follows I will try to make this clear by two examples.

The first example is poem 8, for which I will quote in full Kandasamy’s translation (without the line numbers but with the punctuation marks):

Whose daughter is the maiden with cooling eyes of delightful streaks suffering from subdued pain, waist, where leafy garment of variegated flowers; dangle, and body like a

precious gem? Long live her father! She made us suffer. May the mother who begot her, get the value of, *Toṇṭi* of *Poraiyaṇ* of strong chariots, where those who reap, reaping, those who give getting, mire smeared, eye like blue lily of lovely strong stalk flowers in the stalks.

In this connection I would like to draw attention to the sentence “*Toṇṭi* ..., where those who reap, reaping, those who give getting, ... blue lily of lovely strong stalk flowers in the stalks”. The English is unclear. Wilden’s translation may be read as an attempt to correct Kandasamy’s: “*Toṇṭi*, [the city] of *Poraiyaṇ* with firm chariot,/ where, as cutters cut [and] carriers receive [the harvest],/ blue water-lilies flower in [hay-]heaps like eyes,/ with beautiful strong stems spread in the cool mud,/ in the wide paddy field.” As I will show, her translation is as imprecise and misconstrued as Kandasamy’s. At this point already I want to mention the brackets around “and” in “cutters cut [and] carriers receive”; the word, however, is actually found in the text. Turning to the “poetic” translations, in Subramanian’s the chariot and mud/mire have disappeared altogether: “*Tondi* ..., Where among the paddy sheaves/ Harvested by the farmer,/ And carried by his men,/ Blooms a lovely *neytal*/ Dark as a maiden’s eyes.” The one by Dakshinamurthy is too free and has so completely ignored the word order of the original that it need not be quoted here.

All four translations seem to ignore the grammatical problem offered by the two verbal participles *arintu* and *per̥ru* in the 6<sup>th</sup> line of the poem: *arivaṇar arintum taruvaṇar per̥rum* (the final *-m* is part of the copulative construction *-um ... -um*). Unless we are dealing with concessive constructions here, which is highly unlikely, the syntax demands that their subjects, *arivaṇar* and *taruvaṇar* respectively, are also the subjects of the verb which completes the clause formed by these dependent participles. In the text used by Kandasamy, and presumably by Subramanian and Dakshinamurthy as well, the first verb which comes into consideration is the participle *pūkkun* in line 8 in the phrase *pūkkun ... toṇṭi*, “*Toṇṭi* ... in which the *neytal* blooms”. With this text the syntactic problem seems unsolvable. One of the merits of Wilden’s book is that it offers variant readings which she has culled from various manuscripts and editions. These variants include the relative participle *tāya* for *tāy* in line 7, *taṇcēru tāy[a] maṭaṇuṭai nōṇrāt*. The last two phrases, *maṭaṇuṭai nōṇrāt*, describe the *neytal* flower, “which is beautiful and has a strong stalk”. Wilden construes *taṇcēru tāya* with the *neytal*, or its stem, as well, which is “spread in the cool mud”. This, however, does not solve the riddle mentioned above concerning the verbal

participles. A possible way out is to construe *tāya* with *Toṇṭi* in line 9<sup>1</sup> and to take both *arivaṇar* and *taruvaṇar* as its subjects. Before providing a possible translation of the phrase I would like to note that the fact that the field is muddy makes it highly unlikely that we are dealing with a description of the process of harvesting the paddy; rather we seem to deal with the transplanting of the young paddy plants.<sup>2</sup> A possible translation then is: “*Toṇṭi*, ... where in the fields (various people) splash through the mud: people taking out (the tiny paddy shoots) as well as those who take over (these shoots) and distribute them again”. The point of the description of *Toṇṭi* is that the *neytal* flowers retain their attractiveness even after they have been plucked and have ended up on a big heap (*pōrvu*) of the paddy plants.

The second example is *Narriṇai* 6, Kandasamy’s translation of which runs as follows:

If I could get one who could approach and say to the young maiden of verveless sallow resembling the fibre peeled porous thick stalk of lily growing in water, spotted waist, broad, blue lily like, prominent, beautiful cooling eyes, broad shoulders, she would not say “who is he?”, when it is told “we have come”; she of the black manifold luxuriant tresses smelling the woods of valorous archer Ōri, where the curve nosed fruits produced by the wayside *kumil*, become food to the jumping young deer, will be greatly bewildered.

I do not think that it is necessary to comment on the English, which is difficult to follow and curiously unidiomatic. What I would like to comment on is that in this translation the order of the sentences of the original has been completely and quite unnecessarily turned around. The same is seen in Wilden’s translation: “If only [we] could get someone going to reach the little woman ... [and] say [to her] ‘we have come (line 11),’ she would be very bewildered (line 11), ... she who doesn’t say ‘who is he? (line 6)’”. As I see it, however, the construction of the poem is: *kuṛumakaṭ* [4] *keytac ceṇru ceppunark perinē* [5] *yivar yār enkuvaḷ*

- 1 For the distance between the relative participle *tāya* and the head noun *toṇṭi* assumed here, see “The Weaver Bird in Old Tamil Caṅkam Poetry: A Critical Essay on the Method of Translating Classical Tamil Poetry”. *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 21 (1997), esp. pp. 299–300.
- 2 Similarly in *Narriṇai* 400, in which large fish are described swimming in the inundated fields near the *cūṭṭu* piled up by the *arivaṇar*. For *cūṭ(t)u* the *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*. Oxford 1961, no. 2248 mentions, among other meanings, “bundle, sheaf of transplanted rice”. I fail to understand Wilden’s translation of this passage: “fish are leaping near the ornaments(?) put [there] by the cutters” (the question mark after the translation of *cūṭṭu* with “ornaments” is Wilden’s).



*allaṇ* [6] ... *perumpētuṟuval* *yām vantaṇam eṇavē* [11], “If we could have got someone to go to the girl (to announce our arrival), she would not have asked ‘Who is that?’, but have worried greatly instead, because we had to come (along a path with many distractions).” It should be noted that in this case Dakshinamurthy seems to have interpreted the construction of the poem correctly, although it is difficult to agree with him when he takes *(y)ivar* in *yivar yār eṇkuval* *allaṇ* as referring to the messenger(s): “If we get someone who will ... inform her ... , she will never question their bonafides; instead, she will turn mad with joy on hearing of our coming”. In the case of the other poetic translation, the one by Subramanian, it is extremely difficult to recognize anything of the original text: “She gets worried, she is apt to start at the slightest sound/ To herself muttering, ‘Can it be the one for whom I wait?’/ Now I wish that I can find someone who can go/ And apprise her of my arrival and put her mind at peace/ How I pray for such a friend, a messenger in need/ Who can fill the anguished girl with delight at my coming!” Apart from everything else, in this translation the point of the poem is lost completely.

The two poems discussed above have been randomly chosen. However, the picture did not improve after some more checks. As far as poetic translations are concerned, the *Narriṇai* has not been very lucky. A.V. Subramanian and A. Dakshinamurthy clearly do not stand up to A.K. Ramanujan. As for faithful translations, and this is of course the basic problem, I am afraid little progress has been made since the one by Kandasamy. Personally, I wish that the idea of a “linguistic” translation, introduced by Kandasamy and perfected into what I consider to be a complete travesty by Wilden, would be abandoned altogether. The two examples discussed here have failed to convince me of the usefulness of this type of translation. Furthermore, one would wish that future translators are more critical and evince more philological rigour in the face of problems. Since Kandasamy’s time, we have got the disposal of good grammars, dictionaries, and indexes, which should be made use of. Furthermore, I have my doubt about the ambition to try to finish the translation of all the 400 poems of the *Narriṇai* in only a few years. Easy poems are rare and one will come across many poems which remain a mystery even after returning to them for the tenth time. To put a question mark after an incomprehensible translation, as is often done by Wilden, and leave it to the reader to find out what the problem is, is no solution.

Herman Tieken